DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 142 164 IR 004 366

TITLE Selection Guidelines: School Library Resources, Textbooks, Instructional Material.

INSTITUTION New York State Education Dept., Albany. Bureau of School Libraries.

PUB DATE 76

NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Board of Education Policy; *Library Material Selection; Media Selection; Policy Formation; *School Libraries

ABSTRACT

This publication has been prepared to assist school districts in the State of New York to develop and carry out a materials selection policy for school libraries. Recommendations are made as to the development process, components, assumptions, and criteria of the selection policy. Procedures for dealing with controversial materials are also discussed. (SC)

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The University of the State of New York
THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
Bureau of School Libraries
Albany, New York 12234

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IR004366

SELECTION GUIDELINES

SCHOOL LIBRARY RESOURCES, TEXTBOOKS, INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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Introduction

> "Democracy is dependent upon the right of people to study and discuss issues freely. Equally important, it is dependent upon a citizenry which exercises its rights, which keeps well informed, searches actively for divergent points of view, evaluates courses of action in the light of available evidence and basic democratic values, and then acts responsibly on the basis of the decisions made. Such behaviors do not develop by accident; they are learned in the schools within the context of societal problems, many of which are controversial in nature." [1]

If the schools are to carry out this important role of helping students to develop the skills and attitudes, and to acquire the knowledge necessary to function successfully in society, then students must be provided with opportunities and experiences which foster critical thinking in an atmosphere of free inquiry. Students must learn to make choices in solving individual and societal problems. Inescapably such problems and choices will involve controversial issues and materials.

Recently there has appeared to be an increase in expressions of concern and protest by parents and other members of the community regarding controversial issues and materials in the schools. This is to be expected in a dynamic society and such concerns deserve and should receive careful consideration. Boards of Education should provide for effective policies and procedures for the selection and review of school library resources and other instructional materials used in our schools. The purpose of this publication is to assist Boards and administrators to develop and carry out such policies.

The State Education Department strongly urges each school district to develop and formally adopt a Materials Selection Policy. Such a policy helps to ensure a consistent procedure for materials selection by all district personnel charged with this responsibility. A written policy statement can also be shared with parents and other citizens to enhance their understanding of the goals, purposes, and standards underlying the choice of materials.

Before proceeding with recommendations for developing a selection policy, three underlying principles or assumptions need to be highlighted.

1. The Board of Education is responsible for the quality of education in the school district. It is axiomatic that Board decisions are made in the best interest of all or a majority of the pupils.

2. Parents have the right to determine that individual materials in the school library collection, or of a supplementary nature may not be appropriate for their child. A parent request that such a book or other item not be given to their child should be honored.

[1] National Association of Secondary School Principals. The Bulletin. September 1961.

3. In the event that a formal request is made for reevaluation of a specific book or other item as being appropriate for use in the schools, Boards of Education are encouraged to conduct the review of a challenged material from the point of view of the Board's Selection Policy, and the professional practice and responsibility of the district, rather than the individual material in question. Although the Board must ultimately decide whether the challenged material will continue to be used, a review process which primarily defends the book rather than the right to read it and the professional responsibility of the staff, frequently leads to a "chipping away" process, one book at a time, leading to months of turmoil.

Developing a Materials Selection Policy - Process

The following process is recommended for developing a Materials Selection Policy.

1. The Board of Education makes a decision to develop and adopt a Materials Selection Policy.

2. The Board of Education or its designee appoints an ad hoc committee composed of representative segments of the school community; administrators, teachers, school librarians, parents, and pupils.

3. The committee is charged with the responsibility of developing a Materials Selection Policy. The charge specifies the final date by which the Committee is to complete its work, and is to submit the draft to the Board of Education for consideration. The contents of these Guidelines should be made available to the Committee.

4. The Board of Education studies the recommended Materials Selection Policy. The Board may wish to meet with the Committee to discuss the policy statement.

5. The Board may ask appropriate groups to study the document with the Board for additional suggestions and refinement; for example, department chairmen, established curriculum committees, the teachers' association, the PTA, principals, school librarians, etc.

6. The Board considers the Committee recommendations and adopts a final written statement as the formal Materials Selection Policy of the Board of Education.

7. The Board of Education provides for the implementation of the policy. The superintendent or his representative is charged with the responsibility of disseminating the Materials Selection Policy to all appropriate staff members. In addition to providing staff with copies of the policy, familiarization meetings should be planned with staff to review the policy, respond to any questions, and to enable staff to respond constructively if they are the first to receive a materials challenge.

8. Provision is made to assure a continuing dialogue between the school and the community regarding the policy. Activities are planned to make school and community personnel aware of the importance of the freedom to read, speak, view, listen, evaluate and learn.

9. The Board of Education asks for an annual evaluation of the Materials Selection Policy to determine its continuing effectiveness and appropriateness.

Components of a Selection Policy

The Materials Selection Policy should include the following:

1. A statement indicating that the Board of Education is the governing body legally responsible for the selection of all materials for the school district.

2. A statement delegating the responsibility for the selection of materials to appropriate professional school personnel. If, as is likely, the staff responsible for the selection of textbooks and some supplementary materials is different from the staff responsible for the selection of school library media materials, the different responsibilities should be clearly defined.

3. A statement of the philosophy or goals upon which the selection policy is based, together with the objectives of the selection policy. Such a statement might well define the rights and responsibilities of the various affected constituencies; i.e., students, teachers, and parents. A clear, specific statement of objectives provides firm guidance when potentially controversial materials are considered.

4. A statement defining the materials for which this selection policy applies.

5. The specific criteria for the evaluation and selection of each of the following categories of materials: textbooks, supplementary classroom materials, library media resources, gifts, free materials.

6. A statement which delineates specific criteria for potentially controversial areas.

7. A statement describing the procedure for handling challenged materials.

Content of a Materials Selection Policy

There are numerous statements and guidelines available in the professional literature which suggest specific objectives and criteria for a Materials Selection Policy. Teachers and library media specialists are well acquainted with these and will be able to make them available to the committee charged with the responsibility of developing a Policy Statement.

Best known is the "Policies and Procedures for Selection of Instructional Materials" prepared by the American Association of School Librarians, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611. Reprints are available.

An excellent brochure "Censorship: The Challenge to Freedom in the School" was jointly developed in 1975 by the American Association of School Administrators, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Association of Elementary School Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals. Reprints of this publication are available from Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Suite 1100, 1701 Capital K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

The National Council of Teachers of English is also concerned with the selection of materials which are potentially controversial. Part 1 of "The Student's Right to Read" is addressed to parents and the community. The second part contains the Council's recommendations for book selection and for activities to develop community support. Reprints may be ordered from National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

These and other references are helpful in the development of a Materials Selection Policy and to restate their content here would serve no useful purpose. However, Boards of Education may find that the suggested statements of objectives and criteria for selection, when applied to potentially controversial issues and materials are not sufficiently specific.

Although the State Education Department continues as a matter of policy to maintain that the selection of materials is a task best carried out at the local level, we offer the following more specific guidelines in response to requests from the schools of the State for assistance.

Boards of Education may find the following statements of assumptions and criteria helpful in the development of local Selection Policies. These have been drawn, with some modification, from a number of existing selection policies. Although some statements are more appropriate for school library resources, others for textbooks, and still others for supplementary materials, no attempt has been made to relate the assumption or criterion to a type of material. However, it is assumed that it will be necessary for any student in a given course to use the textual materials for that course. Therefore, Boards are well advised to develop a separate evaluation and review process in the Materials Selection Policy which focuses specifically on textual materials.

Assumptions

1. The Board recognizes the student's right to study a controversial issue which has political, economic, or social significance and concerning which (at his level) he should begin to have an opinion.

2. The Board defines high quality textbooks as those which: present the subject matter in the most effective manner consistent with the Board's philosophy of education; promote pride, confidence, and trust in democratic principles; refrain from partisan presentation of controversial issues; are neither racist nor sexist in nature; and, are interesting, well illustrated, current, and appropriate.

3. The Board recognizes the right of parents to request that their child not be given certain material.

4. The Board denies the right of any parent or group of parents to determine what materials may be used for pupils other than their own children.

5. "The right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied within our constitutional tradition, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways, education is an effort to improve the quality of choices open to man. But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. ...The right of any individual not just to read but to read whatever he wants to read is basic to a democratic society. This right is based on an assmuption that the educated and reading man possesses judgment and understanding and can be trusted with the determination of his own actions. ...In selecting books for reading by young people, /professional personnel/ consider the contribution which each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability for a particular group of students, and its appeal to adolescents."[2]

   It should be understood that if Boards elect to use a statement relating to the right or freedom to read, that this does not infringe on the Board's right to determine the most appropriate materials to be acquired for school use.

Criteria

1. Materials should reflect the pluralistic character and culture of American society.

2. Materials shall be chosen to foster respect for minority groups, women, and ethnic groups.

3. Materials should present and analyze intergroup tension and conflict objectively, placing emphasis upon resolving social and economic problems.

[2]"The Student's Right to Read". National Council of Teachers of English

4. Materials should reflect the problems, aspirations, attitudes, and ideals of society.

5. Materials should be appropriate to the maturity of the student.

6. Materials selected should enable and encourage students to develop as creative and responsible individuals by stimulating the greatest possible diversity of interests and abilities.

7. Materials should provide a background of information which enables pupils to make intelligent judgments in their daily lives.

8. Professional staff may recommend for individual students materials they feel have significance for that student.

9. Materials will be selected for the unusual student as well as the average student.

10. Materials should present a reasonable balance of opposing sides of controversial issues so that students may develop the practice of critical reading and thinking.

11. Materials will not be excluded because of the race, nationality, political, or religious views of the author or producer.

12. Biased or slanted materials may be provided only to meet specific curriculum objectives.

13. The value and impact of any literary work will be judged as a whole.

14. Factual materials about all major religions will be included in the library collection.

15. Materials presenting accents on sex will be subjected to a test of literary merit and reality. The fact of sexual incidents or profanity appearing do not automatically disqualify a book. The decision will be made on the basis of whether the book presents life in its true proportions, whether circumstances are realistically dealt with, and whether the book is of literary value.

It should be understood that these assumptions and criteria are only suggested, and are examples of statements useful for evaluating potentially controversial aspects of materials. The complete list of criteria for school library resources, textbooks and other instructional materials would delineate many other aspects considered during the evaluation process.

Challenged Materials

Despite the efforts of the Board of Education to develop and disseminate a detailed Materials Selection Policy, the nature of controversy is such that exception may be taken to some materials. The importance of a detailed,

formal written procedure for requesting the reevaluation of any materials cannot be overemphasized. Again, the professional literature cited earlier contains many suggestions for such a procedure. We would recommend the following process.

If a question or complaint about specific material cannot be handled informally by the teacher, librarian or principal, the complainant should be invited to file the objections in writing on a form provided for the purpose. (See Appendix A for suggested format.)

The completed form should be sent to a Materials Review Committee. It is well to have this Committee appointed at the beginning of each school year rather than wait for a problem to arise. Admittedly, the Committee might exist with little work to do except to familiarize itself with the Materials Selection Policy and its responsibility in the event of a challenge. However, the availability of such a Review Committee when needed is preferable to the appointment of a Review Committee in an atmosphere of emotion and tension. The Committee could occasionally be asked to review some potentially controversial material which has been acquired or recommended for acquisition by the professional staff about which no concern has been expressed.

In establishing the Review Committee, the Board should consider the inclusion of the various involved constituencies: administrators, teachers, and school librarians from representative grade levels; parents and other residents, and students.

When a formal request for review of material is submitted, the Board must immediately determine whether the material in question should be taken off the shelf or out of the classroom while the review is in progress. In keeping with the basic premise of the responsibility of the Board and the professional staff to select materials, it may be desirable that the material in question not be removed until the review has been concluded. This is particularly true when the material comprises the basic course of study. However, there are instances when the presence of organized pressure groups or a generally emotional atmosphere makes the removal of materials desirable. While removing the material gives the complainants immediate action and, in effect, provides a "cooling off" period, it also will offend that portion of the community with a strong belief in the value of the questioned material. This whole issue emphasizes again the importance of an efficient review procedure which will provide an early decision in these matters.

The Materials Review Committee is charged with the responsibility of reading, viewing, and/or listening to the materials referred to it in their entirety; to check the general acceptance of the materials by searching out reviews and evaluating them, to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the material in question and to form opinions based on the material as a whole.

The Committee may wish to talk with professional staff members who selected the questioned material to ascertain the purpose of the acquisition.

It is desirable for individual Committee members to independently review the material prior to a meeting of the Committee to discuss the issues.

The Committee should be prepared to work on the matter within a concentrated time frame so that a timely response may be given to the complainant. The Board of Education or its designee should set a final date for the completion of the report of the Committee.

It is recommended that the report be submitted to the Board of Education directly rather than to establish a hierarchy of appeal from principal, to superintendent to the Board of Education. The longer the issue remains in question, the more potential exists for creating additional tensions.

In either event, the Board of Education must decide to either retain the material, to cease using the material in the schools, or to limit the use of the material in question to certain students or to certain conditions. For example, the Board may determine that a book is of a level of maturity which would not make it appropriate for inclusion in the general library collection but that it would contribute to the knowledge and development of students if used under the direct guidance of a social studies teacher.

Finally, all concerned parties should be notified of the final disposition of the matter in writing, together with a rationale supporting the decision.

Summary

The quality of education is affected in large measure by the quality and variety of materials available to teachers and students. Boards of Education are urged to give careful consideration to the policies and procedures which govern the selection and use of such materials.

The State Education Department, and specifically the staff of the Bureau of School Libraries are available to provide assistance to the schools of the State in the development and implementation of a Materials Selection Policy.

Appendix A

REQUEST FOR REEVALUATION OF A BOOK OR OTHER INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Title:* _____

Author: _____ Book_____ Film_____

Other_____

Publisher or Producer: _____ For Grade Level_____

Material Used in Classroom_____ Library_____ (check applicable)

Course Teacher_____

*Request initiated by (Name)_____ Date_____

*Telephone_____ *Street_____

*Post Office_____

Complainant represents (check applicable) Himself__Organization or Group___

If group, Name:_____

*Optional

1. What do you believe is the theme or the purpose of the material?

2. Is your objection to this material based upon your personal exposure to it, upon reports you have heard, or both?

3. Have you read/heard/seen the material in its entirety?

4. To what do you specifically object:

5. Does the material have any merit or value for a specific population or age group?

6. For what age group do you believe this material would be appropriate?

OVER

7. Are you aware of the judgement regarding this book or material by literary or educational reviewers?

_____

8. What action would you recommend be taken regarding the use of this material in the school?

_____

_____

_____

*Signature_____ _____
Date Signed

*Optional